

The New Normal by **Idrab**

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Summary: Things they don't mention, and how they deal (or don't deal) with what happened.

The New Normal

Author's note: I own nothing relevant.

I.

There is a spot on the living room ceiling where a monster crawled through.

Jonathan hasn't been able to turn his back to it since it happened. When he enters the house, he keeps himself facing that part of the room, and when walking down the hallway or to the kitchen, a part of him is always aware of that particular spot on the living room ceiling (where the monster crawled through). Four times, already, he's had to literally back out of the room, just because he can't face away from it.

(He tried, afterwards. He tried casually walking through the room, eyes fixed on the door or the sofa or the hallway, but the feeling of panic and *where-is-it-where-IS-it-we're-going-to-die* got stronger with each step until he simply couldn't contain himself; he jumped at an imaginary sound and found himself pressing against the far wall, heart hammering in his chest and everything slowly coming into focus again after a white-out. He stared at the spot on the living room ceiling, remembered the monster, and scrambled along the wall and out the front door. He ran until he fell to his knees, shaking and gasping for breath.)

He knows it's not real, that it's only memories. But that somehow makes it worse, because the memories? They are of a monster that was real; a monster that crawled through his living room ceiling and into his home, a monster that came *this* close to killing him and that took his brother from him. What happened was *real*, so he doesn't feel safe when he's telling himself that it's only a memory. It may not be real *now*, but it was real *then*, and if it happened once it could happen again. So he doesn't turn his back. He needs to face whatever comes. He's prepared.

The rest of the house, strangely, doesn't affect him at all. Not the

kitchen, where he spent days comforting his mother when she broke down because she'd lost a son. Not his room, where he waited with Nancy and Steve, barely breathing, for a monster to come after them. Not even the hallway, where the monster burned. But that spot on the ceiling?

He spends a lot of time at home in his room, or in Will's room. As a family, they spend a lot of time in the kitchen. And if he keeps glancing out towards the living room and always seats himself so he can see the doorway, no one mentions it.

II.

There are some parts of the woods where monsters dwell.

Nancy used to feel safe surrounded by the trees in the woods, before it happened. She used to take shortcuts there, and when she was younger she played in the woods behind her house and the trees were her friends. They protected her and felt like home. Nowadays, they feel threatening. Like they're hiding something evil, something unexplained, something out for her blood. They *did*, after all, not long ago.

She doesn't like to walk alone near the woods anymore; if she has to, she walks in the middle of the road, as far away from the branches as possible. Several times, she's waited until someone else is heading in the same direction, and she has lost count of the times she has asked someone to drive her. Because she remembers a flash of something scary between the trees. She remembers a dead deer, being dragged into the bushes right in front of them. She remembers crawling through a small space into a dark and scary place where she got lost in the woods and was almost caught by a monster.

She can't recall the feeling of safety that she used to have in the woods, anymore.

It's not like she hasn't tried to get over it. She's found herself standing by the side of the road, facing the woods and closing her eyes. Breathing in, breathing out. In, out. Slow breaths. And as long as she keeps her eyes closed, she can manage. She can tell herself she is safe at home or that someone is with her or ... But then she hears the

rustling leaves, or a creak of wood, and her eyes snap open and she is faced with the sight of trees (and something grey and gangly with a face full of teeth), and she stumbles back.

It's not there, but. It *could* be. It's been hiding in the trees before.

She hurries back to her friends, to her home, to safety, and she accepts that maybe she won't ever feel safe in the woods again. It's a small price to pay, after all, for surviving.

Since Barb disappeared, she spends more time with her family (indoors, where there are no trees hiding monsters). She spends time with Steve, who's more than happy to drive her anywhere she wants to go. She's even spent some time with Jonathan, lately. And if any of them notice her reluctance to go anywhere alone, or her refusal to go near the woods, well. They don't mention it.

III.

There is a section of the wall where her son was trapped.

Joyce shudders every time she looks at it. She remembers hearing her boy, sensing him, being so close to him but yet unable to get to him. She remembers panicking; ripping off the wallpaper, clawing at the barrier separating her from him. And she remembers the unbearable weight of her failure.

(She also remembers fear – because a monster reached out towards her through the wall – but most of the fear was for Will, because she couldn't *get to him*, she couldn't *protect him*!)

That section of the wall is a constant reminder that she failed him when he needed her the most, and after it happened she could barely stand to look at it. She tried hanging a painting there, but it did nothing but draw attention to that particular place. She moved a bookcase there and filled it with books and things and trinkets, but it was like putting a band-aid on a ripped-off limb. She felt silly and bad, like she was trying to hide something. So she moved the bookcase back to where it used to be, and removed the nail she'd hammered into the wall for the painting.

So she leaves that section of the wall bare, because it's a reminder of what had happened. And, if she glares at it long enough, it fills her with strength and determination; no one – *nothing* – will ever take her boys from her again, not if she can help it. (She leaves the hammer leaning against the wall.)

If she spends time in the living-room, and if she stares at the wall for longer than a few seconds, she gets stuck in the memories, and she feels the chill and the darkness of The Upside Down creeping up on her. Every time when that happens, she has to reach out to her sons afterwards, and make sure they are okay. She must see them, touch them, hear their voices. Only then does the darkness of that other place recede.

They don't spend much time in the living room, anymore. And if she acts clingy, and doesn't like to let her boys out of sight for very long, none of them mentions it.

IV.

There is a burned piece of carpet in Jonathan's house, where they burned a monster.

Steve has only been there twice, since it happened. The first time, they hadn't even done anything to fix it: there was still a burned and stained patch of the carpet in the middle of the hallway and he almost gagged when the smell hit him (the smell was gone by then, but it will never be *gone*). The second time, there was a new carpet and freshly painted walls; no one would have been able to tell what had happened there. At least, no one who didn't fight a nightmare with a bat (or a gun, or a lighter) and watched it (and smelled it, and heard it) burn.

Jonathan had hurried through the hallway to his room, and left Steve to follow. Steve couldn't really move right away, because there was a *monster* there; a burning, screeching, deadly nightmare ... But then he blinked, and of course it wasn't there. Of course.

He never thought that one minute of his life, or maybe two, could change him so much.

Sometimes he wonders if he imagined it. Maybe he got drunk and hallucinated it, or Jonathan had hit him harder than he thought? Surely that would be more plausible than ... than whatever he thinks happened? It's easier to pretend that it was all in his imagination when he's alone, in school or at home. He can almost tell himself that it was just his mind playing tricks on him, that it wasn't real.

And then he looks Nancy or Jonathan in the eye, and it hits him just how *real* it actually was.

The danger they were in, the threat they faced together, binds them together. No one else understands why Steve is watching the world around him with more wary eyes nowadays. Why he has changed, so suddenly. But he has seen something that not many people has seen; faced something so terrible that most people can't even imagine it. And he survived. All three of them did. So of course they seek out each other more, now. Of course.

And if he has to steel himself to go through the hallway in the Byers house, and if Jonathan turns around just in time to see him actually *jumping* over that spot of the floor? Then Jonathan looks away and doesn't mention it.

V.

There once was a fort in the forest called "Castle Byers".

Will only remembers fragments of what happened (they say it's a blessing). He remembers being taken from the shed, but not what took him. He remembers running, and finding the fort and hiding. He remembers *cold, dark, damp*. He remembers crushing fear and panic. He remembers his mother's voice that is far away, and a roar that is way too close. More cold, more dark, more damp.

He remembers a girl's voice, but not her words.

And then nothing, until the hospital.

Somehow, he still *knows*. Knowing is not the same as remembering it, though, and he thinks he should probably be grateful for that fact.

Things are getting back to normal, in a way, even though things will

never ever be as they were. Not for any of them. He has changed, he knows it ... but *everyone* seems to have changed, so maybe that's the new normal?

He's never going to feel fully safe again, though. Not when the one place that was his turned into a place of fear and hiding and suffering. And when he mentions this to Jonathan one night after a nightmare (in not so many words), Jonathan only hugs him closer and nods.

The next day, Jonathan takes an axe and a can of gasoline and walks off into the woods. He returns much later, and Will knows that Castle Byers is gone, and it makes him feel ... He doesn't know how it makes him feel.

They build a new fort together, him and Jonathan and mom, close to the house. His friends come over, too, sometimes, and helps. It's something *new*, and *theirs*, and it may not be safe but at least he feels lighter when he's there.

They spend a lot of time building it, and then they spend a lot of time being there, together.

And what happened to him ... well. No one *mentions* it.

But they all know.